

Dead, Faithful, and Lukewarm

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Revelation 3

Revelation chapter 3 continues with Jesus' messages to the seven churches, specifically to the last three—Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Remember: these are *Jesus'* messages to the churches—not John's. Jesus is pictured walking among the golden lampstands which represent the churches (Revelation 1:20). He is closely connected with His church on earth and aware of its condition.

Sardis—the Dead Church

(A.D. 1500s-1790s)

To the church at Sardis, Jesus says,

I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God (Revelation 3:1, 2).

Sardis is the “dead church.” It purports to be alive, but it is largely dead. It has become an institution and exists mainly to preserve its power and authority. It has a name—a reputation—of being alive spiritually, but Jesus sees Sardis for what it is full of externals with no vital spirituality.

New Testament Christians possessed a living faith that caused them to share the good news with their neighbors and friends. The church grew rapidly. But through the centuries, the church began to compromise with the world in order to be accepted and gain popularity. It accommodated pagan practices. It substituted ritual for genuine worship.

Sardis represents the Christian church at the time when the medieval period was coming to a close. The gospel had been so changed that a living faith was hard to find. It

was in this time period that the Protestant Reformation arose as a reaction to a church that had the name of being alive, but was spiritually dead. Jesus says, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die” (verse 2). So there was a little life left in the Sardis church. Some truths remained.

You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy (verse 4).

The Protestant Reformation breathed life into the church again. In our own personal spiritual experience we can find faith slipping away just as it did in the Christian church through the centuries. A little compromise here, a little neglect there—and we find our connection with God growing weaker. When faith is slipping away in your life, God says to be watchful and strengthen the things that remain.

Jesus continues, “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. . . . He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before the angels (verses 3, 5).

In other words, Sardis needs to repent by turning back to God and restoring the gospel and the apostolic doctrine. The medieval church relied on human tradition; the Protestant Reformation focused on the Bible. The Reformers opposed the dead teachings of a dead church with the living Word.

In the last days, we will need to stand on the Word of God when all else is falling around us. At that time, the apostle Paul says, many will have a form of godliness, while denying its power (2 Timothy 3:5). If we are faithful, our names will be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. And Jesus will stand up in heaven in the judgment before the Father and the angels and confess our names as His faithful followers!

Philadelphia—the Faithful Church

(A.D. 1790s-1840s)

“Philadelphia” means “brotherly love.” Philadelphia was the church whose members loved one another. To this church Jesus says,

These things says He who is holy, He who is true, *“He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”*. I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, and have kept My word, and have not denied My holy name. . . . Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown (verses 7-11).

Some have seen this “open door” as referring to the door of salvation and the “key of David” as the gospel—the key to eternal life. During the Dark Ages, the medieval church claimed to hold the key to salvation through its priests who could forgive sins. This was the main issue of dispute between the established church and the Protestant Reformers. During the time of the Philadelphia church, the good news of salvation through Jesus was proclaimed and accepted with joy by many. A door had been opened that had been closed for centuries.

There is yet another way of looking at the “open door” which Jesus says He has set before the Philadelphia church. When we come to the next chapter of Revelation, chapter 4, we will find John looking through an “open door” into the throne room of heaven. What he sees through that door is much like the judgment in heaven that Daniel describes in chapter 7 of his book. As we study the book of Daniel we discover the 2,300-day (year) time period predicted there ended in 1844. At that time the sanctuary was to be cleansed which is representative of the Day of Atonement—Judgment Day.

The door to the Most Holy Place was open and judgment began. Jesus opened that door, and no one can shut it. When the judgment is completed, Jesus will shut that door,

and no one can open it. The eternal destiny of every person is decided. The judgment is over, and Jesus will return as He has promised.

Jesus concludes His letter to the Philadelphia church with these words:

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him my new name (verse 12).

The focus is on the sanctuary in heaven and on the New Jerusalem where God's people will spend eternity with Him. He who overcomes will be secure forever; "he shall go out no more."

Laodicea—the Lukewarm Church

(A.D. 1840s—Second Coming of Jesus)

It's interesting that of the seven churches, Jesus finds something to praise in each one—except for two. He has no words of praise for Sardis or Laodicea. Laodicea is the "lukewarm" church. "Laodicea" means "a people are judged" or "judgment of the people." Laodicea is the last church of the seven. It is the church of the judgment hour, God's last-day church just before Jesus returns. Since Laodicea is the last of the seven churches, it obviously has meaning for the last generation of Christians. What Jesus says to the Laodicean church He is saying to us!

These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the

shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve that you may see (verses 14-19).

Jesus identifies Himself to Laodicea as “the Faithful and True Witness.” He paints an unflattering picture of this church and its spiritual condition. Jesus is the “True Witness.” He tells us the truth about ourselves whether we like it or not.

Jesus also says that He is “the Beginning of the creation of God. The Greek word translated in this verse as “Beginning,” is *αρχη* which means “beginner” or “first cause.” Ephesians 3:9 explains. “God . . . created all things through Jesus Christ.” John says, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3).

Spiritually, too, Laodicea was neither hot nor cold. Jesus says He wishes they were either hot or cold—either is preferable to being lukewarm.

Laodicea was a city of about 150,000 at the time John was writing Revelation. It was a financial center and a place of extreme wealth. In A.D. 61 an earthquake destroyed Laodicea. The Roman government offered financial aid to help rebuild the city, but Laodicea replied, “We don’t need your help. We have enough money to rebuild our city ourselves.” The Roman historian Tacitus wrote: “Laodicea arose from its ruins by the strength of her own resources and with no help from us.” Laodicea was wealthy and proud. It didn’t need help from anyone. This complacent, materialistic church saw itself as rich and in need of nothing.

But what does the “True Witness” say of Laodicea? “You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (verse 17).

They claim to be rich spiritually. But Jesus counsels them, “Buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich” (verse 18). What is the gold that Jesus advises us to “buy” from Him? The apostle Peter writes of our “faith, being much more precious than gold . . . tested by fire” (1 Peter 1:7). Jesus is telling us that we need a faith that will stand the fiery tests of the last days. The Laodicean message is telling us to develop a faith and a spiritual strength of character in the days just before Jesus comes that will carry us through to the kingdom.

Laodicea was known also for its garment industry. It was a fashion center as well as a financial powerhouse. There was a certain kind of wool found there that came from specially bred black sheep. It was extremely fine and glossy, and the Laodiceans made it into beautiful garments that were sought after as the height of fashion.

Jesus tells the Laodicean church, “You think you’re dressed in the latest fashions? You’re naked spiritually and you don’t realize it.” His counsel? “Buy from Me . . . white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed” (verse 18).

The white garment is a symbol of Jesus’ robe of spotless righteousness which He offers freely to everyone who comes to Him confessing their sins and accepting Him as their Savior (Isaiah 61:10).

Lastly, Laodicea was a medical center. It was known for developing an eye salve to deal with inflammation and problems of the eye. The Laodicean church thought that it saw itself clearly, and it was pleased with what it saw. But Jesus says, “You are blind. You don’t see at all. You need to buy from Me eye salve that will cure your spiritual blindness. This eye salve will give you clear spiritual vision to see yourself as you really are.”

The eye salve is the work of the Holy Spirit that convicts us of sin and shows us ourselves as we truly are. He shows us the reality of sin, righteousness, and judgment in our lives (John 16:8). The Spirit shows us our sin. He points us to the righteousness of Jesus which can cover our sins. And He assures us that if we are covered by Jesus’ righteousness, we need have no fear of the judgment.

Laodicea is the church which He rebukes most sharply. But it is also the church to which He makes His most loving, promise.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (verses 20, 21).

We sit down to eat with our families. We invite our close friends over for a meal. Mealtimes are times of intimate fellowship. We talk about things as we eat. We share things with each other. Jesus says He would like to sit down and eat a meal with us. He wants to spend this close interaction with us and talk to us and share with us so that we can get to know Him better.

Laodicea is the last church before the coming of Jesus. He wants us to know Him as a close Friend so that when He comes we can sit down together in close fellowship at the glorious, marriage supper of the Lamb.